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MV youths visit elk country

City kids get to play in the great outdoors

By RENEE BODINE
U.S. Forest Service

BAKER LAKE — Thirty-seven youths tore into Schreiber's Meadow on Sept. 25 through thick, low huckleberry brush. Behind them was a clear view of Mount Baker. Ahead was the fall foliage.

The children, from the Kulshan Creek neighborhood in Mount Vernon, were learning for the first time how to navigate with a compass. They also were looking for evidence of wildlife. Several stopped to pick and eat berries.

"What kind of animal do you think did this?" wildlife biologist Don Gay asked. He was pointing

to a small tree with freshly shredded bark.

One boy thought it was a bear. Most weren't sure. It turned out to be elk, an animal most of the children on the trip had never seen before. Gay, who works for the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, explained that elk are really just large deer.

Jonathan Suarez, 11, has been going on trips organized by the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Program since he was 8. A wildlife enthusiast, Jonathan catches frogs or snakes in his spare time, and watches the Discovery Channel whenever he gets a chance. He does well in his science classes.

"I want to grow up like Don or Orlando," he said. Orlando Garcia, a visitor information assistant for the U.S. Forest Service, coordinates trips for the program and works as

an interpreter. He is fluent in Spanish and grew up in the Kulshan neighborhood.

After learning to orient with a compass and identify elk, the kids broke for lunch: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Afterward, leaders took groups for a hike about a mile down Park Butte Trail to Rocky Creek to play near the water.

Within a few minutes of walking, one of the little boys accompanying Garcia at the head of the group asked, "Orlando, where is the shortcut? Is it close? You know where it is, don't you?"

The Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Program takes children from Mount Vernon on outdoor adventures monthly. It was the first outing for about half of those on the Schreiber's Meadow trip.

The Mount Vernon Police Department, the Forest Service,

the National Park Service and the North Cascades Institute started the program in 2007 to expose urban Hispanic youths to the outdoors and careers in natural sciences. Outings have included hikes, tree plantings, eagle watching on the Skagit River, and looking for mountain goats on Artist's Point.

Most participating children are of middle-school age. Some bring elementary-level brothers or sisters.

In November, the Kulshan kids will paint a mural celebrating their experiences from this year. In December they will have an open house party at the Kulshan Creek Community Resource Center in Mount Vernon.

To find out more about participating in the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Program, call Officer Gerondale at 360-336-0630.



Renee Bodine / USFS

Chase Culzon, 9, of Mount Vernon uses a compass for the first time during the Kulshan Creek neighborhood outing to Schreiber's Meadow.

ext. 1456. Learn more about the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest at www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/.

Valley receives national habitat status

By **KATHY BOYD**
Features Writer

Next time you are out of doors, stop for just a moment, wherever you are, and look around. Nothing new or unusual, you might say. But that's the point. Our vibrant, verdant and wildlife-abundant valley is a natural habitat.

The only difference now is that the National Wildlife Federation has made it official.

The Skagit Valley was certified in August as a Community Wildlife Habitat — just the 45th in the entire United States.

The valley became one of only 10 other communities in the state to receive a similar designation during a public celebration, held between afternoon rain showers Aug. 26 at the Kulshan Community Bird and Butterfly Garden, 2520 Kulshan Ave., in northeast Mount Vernon.

The designated habitat area comprises about 250 square miles and includes the Mount Vernon ZIP codes, Conway, Edison/Bow, Clear Lake and La Conner.

A group of community volunteers called the Skagit Valley Backyard Wildlife Habitat Team led the certification project in partnership with the Skagit Conservation District and the National Wildlife Federation.

"We're a small team, probably one of the smallest in the country," volunteer chairwoman Donna Schram said. "It took hundreds and hundreds of hours to make this happen."

Nearly 200 residential yards within the Skagit Valley were certified as natural habitats. In addition, five businesses, eight school grounds, two church grounds, and 10 parks were certified through the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife habitat program.

Each certified site must incorporate four



Scott Terrell / Skagit Publishing

Emiliano, 9, Brensa, 11, and Ruby Victoria-Reyes, 4, show some of the flowers they helped plant during a dedication ceremony on Aug. 26 at the Kulshan Community Bird and Butterfly Garden, 2520 Kulshan Ave., Mount Vernon.

requirements, Schram said — food, water, shelter, and a place for animals to raise their young.

She said the newly restored garden in the Kulshan community where the celebration was held reflected her team's vision for enhancing habitat for wildlife and spaces for children.

"It's just a gem," she said. "A lot of the neighborhood kids helped with the restoration. It's not just pretty, it's pretty with a function. We have butterflies, birds, deer, snakes — they are all welcome."

National Wildlife Federation spokesperson Roxanne Paul, in a news release, commended the Skagit Valley residents and the habitat team for creating "a community where people and wildlife can flourish."

"At a time when communities are faced with the problems of losing habitat to development, Skagit Valley stands out as a model for other communities to emulate," Paul said.

Tuesday, September 21, 2010